

Brown University Watson Institute | E76_Ross Cheit_Final

SARAH BALDWIN: Hi there! It's Sarah, host of Trending Globally. Before we start, I wanted to mention something. We're trying to learn more about our listeners, what you like about our podcasts at Watson, what you don't, and what you'd like to hear more of. So we created a survey, and we'd love to hear from you. It only takes a few minutes to fill out, and it will really help us improve the show, and you'll be entered into a raffle for a pair of Bose noise-canceling headphones.

A link to this survey is in our show description. You can even go fill it out right now. We'll still be here when you get back. Thanks! Now onto the show.

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Whether it's the economics of small-scale farming or the environmental impact of a fast food hamburger, what we eat is about way more than just nutrition. Ross Cheit is a political science professor at the Watson Institute, and he's been helping Brown students make these connections in a class he designed called the politics of food. But one type of food he's realized is treated a little differently from all the rest. Fish. But why?

Well for one thing fish are pretty hard to keep track of.

ROSS CHEIT: There is a popular saying that counting fish is just like counting trees, only they're invisible and they move around.

SARAH BALDWIN: In their forthcoming book *Big Fish: Politics, Policy, and American Seafood*, Cheit and his co-authors look at the role fish play when it comes to feeding the world. They explore how fish fit into ecosystems and global trade patterns, and ultimately how they land on our plate. We started by talking about seafood's global nature, because unlike anything grown or raised on land fish have a more international flavor.

ROSS CHEIT: There's a lot of US water so there's lots of fish, and we do have in abundance some species that just aren't very popular in this country. These small fish, herrings, things like that.

SARAH BALDWIN: Which are wildly popular elsewhere.

ROSS CHEIT: Right, so it makes sense to me that we send a lot of fish to Portugal, Spain, and then the EU, and we send a lot to Japan. So there's things-- you know, California discovered that sea urchin can be pretty profitable, but there aren't a lot of people in the US who want to eat sea urchin. There are a lot of people in Japan who do, so it's very international in that way, but there are species like salmon that we eat a fair amount of that we catch domestically and we export it. We do both.

SARAH BALDWIN: And you make that interesting point I think too that the Alaska fishing industry couldn't just make it if it were only selling to Americans.

ROSS CHEIT: There's a very popular argument on the agriculture side that's about local food, and it's sort of local is good. Now there are people in my field-- there's a famous article called *The Locavore Trap* that does argue why local isn't always better, but there is this sense people think local is better, and those arguments have started to be made about fish. So there are people saying you should favor fish caught in the US waters and those are local, but those aren't local. The fish caught in Alaska travels 3,000 miles to get here. It's not a local fish.

I'm kind of indifferent between whether we're eating a fish that was got in Iceland or Canada or Alaska.

SARAH BALDWIN: And is it not true that a fish might have been in American waters at one point and then wasn't?

ROSS CHEIT: Yes, so what you're raising there's so much variety. Highly migratory species I think most people would agree are the hardest to manage, so the ones that really go in and out of international waters are the hardest to manage. We have also gotten very interested in this book on an issue that I think has gotten very little attention, which is the federalism issue in US waters, which is there's both state and federal waters.

SARAH BALDWIN: Right.

ROSS CHEIT: So the first three miles is state and then out to 200 miles is federal, and there are some species that do a lot of crossing back and forth between state and federal. So the challenge that this poses for management in a system where we have state governments and a federal government is enormous. And one of the resolutions are something called state compacts, where states actually get together under the approval of Congress and act as a whole so that there are these regional groups trying to manage state waters. But it's very challenging when you get to 12 states together who have different interests to try to come up with rules that they'll all agree on.

SARAH BALDWIN: Are you optimistic about that?

ROSS CHEIT: Well, I guess it really depends on the species. So many of the questions I end up saying it depends on where or what, so striped bass is a species that travels from the Chesapeake Bay quite far north. It goes through, I don't know, a dozen states and it is federal waters and state

waters, and it's had all sorts of challenges. But I think many people would say that striped bass has been pretty effectively managed in recent years and has come back, and some of that is a collective effort of states to do a better job.

Now, there are reasons why that might work much better for striped bass than other species. There's a lot of money involved in striped bass. It's a very popular recreational fish, so there are recreational interests behind making sure that fish exists that aren't true for a tiny fish like menhaden.

SARAH BALDWIN: And I'm just still curious about this commercial fishing question. How would food policy change if we ate more of what we caught, and why is fishing different? Why isn't there subsidies for fishermen the way there is for farmers?

ROSS CHEIT: Well there are some, and we're looking at that. There is such a thing as disaster payments for fishermen, there are some forms of things that look like crop insurance. So you're right. We don't have like direct payments to fishermen in the same way that we do in some instances in farming, although through disaster payments there are fishermen in New England who have gotten checks from the government that really look like subsidies. But one of the questions we're asking in the book is, what are the politics behind these policies, and sort of have fishermen done worse than farmers. They would certainly say they have, but I think they've done better than is often portrayed.

SARAH BALDWIN: I want to stay on this point of politics, because you seem so uniquely qualified to be pondering these questions because you have degrees in political economy and environmental studies and--

ROSS CHEIT: And law.

SARAH BALDWIN: And law and public policy, and for all I know you have a commercial fishing license as well.

ROSS CHEIT: I don't and I don't know enough about fish, but I do have a wonderful co-author who taught at environmental studies at Brown for 25 years, Caroline Carp-- wonderfully named-- who does really also bring the fishery science that I don't have.

SARAH BALDWIN: So my question is what is the value of bringing a political science lens to this question? How is your book different from books that are written by people who are maybe concerned about ecosystems or nutrition?

ROSS CHEIT: I think those people are most often interested in what the ideal would be. So it's like what would the ideal diet be, what would the best approach be for the environment? And you're starting with some ideal. Political science isn't as normative. Now, we are going to make some recommendations and talk in a normative way at the very end of the book, but what political science can bring is both a predictive and an explanatory ability to understand why things are happening.

So my favorite example is where everyone knows that ground fish collapsed, cod collapsed off of New England, but why did it collapse? And you can read an awful lot of papers by fishery scientists where nothing political happened. It's just some decisions were made and then these were the results, and I think politics explains a lot of what has happened.

So, if you're then going to aim towards what should we do, politics and a political understanding will help you figure out what might be possible and may be how to get there. So I think we're trying to do more explaining.

SARAH BALDWIN: And I was interested to see that you are using students to help do research to write this book.

ROSS CHEIT: My experience at Brown has been you can treat the best undergrads like grad students, and my experience has also been that there's just an incredible array of interesting students. So we have now had several students who have family links to commercial fishing.

SARAH BALDWIN: Really?

ROSS CHEIT: You know, there's a current undergrad whose father owns a boat in Gloucester and is a commercial fisherman and he fishes in the summer, so he has the absolute commercial fisherman perspective. There's a history concentrator who's studying individual fishing quotas, and he's doing original research that's going to be very helpful in us analyzing this method that allocates a percentage of the catch to a fisherman. And some people think this is a wonderful solution and we have some skepticism, and his research is going to really help us portray these in a more complicated way.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, you do say that you make recommendations. Can you talk about some of them at the end of the book?

ROSS CHEIT: Yeah. Well I think--

SARAH BALDWIN: And who they're going to delight, and who they're going to anger.

ROSS CHEIT: Well, I think that they really are going to anger commercial fishermen, because I think that one of our conclusions is we have managed federal waters for the benefit-- and it's really not the benefit of commercial fishermen. It's more for the benefit of people who own commercial fishing vessels, not the people who work on them necessarily, and I think those interests have done very well by the government. They wouldn't necessarily agree, but I think they have, and I think other interests have gotten short shrift and that we're just starting.

One phrase that's starting to come into discussions of fisheries management is ecosystem management. That rather than say, OK, now we're going to make decisions about striped bass, now we're going to make decisions about herring, maybe the two are related and you ought to make the decisions about them together.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, yeah that's another way it's such a complex issue.

ROSS CHEIT: Well, yes.

SARAH BALDWIN: Because different species affect each other differently.

ROSS CHEIT: Right, and then if people who study it would say, well, of course it would make sense to study the interactions, only it's much harder to make a model that does that. It's much easier to model one species, but for example the red snapper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico, people have said it's very, very successful. We had a student look into all of the conditions of that fishery, and we've concluded that one of the reasons it's successful is the decline in shrimp that happened after the big oil spill, and shrimp has gone way down.

Well, when shrimp goes down that creates more room for the red snapper, so some of it is that and that's another way that this is so complicated. Because every fishery that experiences declines, there's then a huge argument. Well, was it overfishing or was it something environmental? And usually it's a combination. It's not going to be one or the other, but the fishermen always point to the other things, and other people always point to the fishermen, and it's probably never just one of them.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, do you think that this book is going to bring some real science and some data to the questions that are so slippery?

ROSS CHEIT: Well I hope so, and I do hope-- I mean, we're aiming this book towards-- we have a sort of general audience in mind, but I think we are thinking of people that are interested in food

studies and undergraduates. But my PhD is public policy, and we do want to make real recommendations that we hope that people in government will pay attention to.

SARAH BALDWIN: Give me one example of a recommendation.

ROSS CHEIT: Well a big example is there's a lot of rules about how the managers decide each year what the total allowable catch should be. We think that there should be margins of safety built into that for uncertainty, there should be something built in for future generations. We think a whole series of calculations could be part of deciding what the total allowable catch would be that would take into account factors that are not adequately considered now, and it would result in lower total allowable catches. That will not be a popular recommendation for commercial fishermen.

SARAH BALDWIN: I have a funny question just in thinking more about how unthought about this subject is.

ROSS CHEIT: Yeah.

SARAH BALDWIN: Is it perhaps because fish are fish and they don't live on land with us? And so we don't quite see them the way we see a mammal or even a reptile or anything else whose production we regulate or whose lives we protect. Fish are sort of this undifferentiated group without arms and legs that we can't see unless as we go to them.

ROSS CHEIT: So there is a popular saying that counting fish is just like counting trees, only they're invisible and they move around.

SARAH BALDWIN: [LAUGHS]

ROSS CHEIT: Right? And so counting trees is hard.

SARAH BALDWIN: Mhm.

ROSS CHEIT: So people in forestry who are trying to figure out, well, how much can we cut in this forest each year, how much is there? they're using satellite photos, they're using sophisticated methods to try to answer one question. How many trees are there? And then you think, yeah, now we translate this over to, but there's lots of kinds of trees and they're underwater and they move around a lot.

And so, yeah, we don't see them, and then I think there's also this feeling that there are a few that we really care about. There are iconic species, there are species that are iconic for

commercial purposes like tarpon that are regulated very well because there's an awful lot of interest in making sure that people can catch tarpon. We manage to do a fair amount of regulation around concern about dolphins being killed in connection with tuna fishing, but that's dolphins.

SARAH BALDWIN: Yes.

ROSS CHEIT: And if they were, you know, some ugly shark we might not feel--

SARAH BALDWIN: Or barracuda.

ROSS CHEIT: Yeah, and so I think--

SARAH BALDWIN: So there is a sort of human subjectivity that is--

ROSS CHEIT: Oh, absolutely there is! And then on top of that on the eating side, Alaska Pollock is what-- you know, I'm not sure people even know what Alaska Pollock is, but it's the largest fishery in America.

SARAH BALDWIN: Is that fish sticks?

ROSS CHEIT: Yes, and it's also the McDonald's fish sandwich. It's a very bland, malleable fish that's just white fish and it doesn't taste like much. So when I think of things like the health benefits of fish, the health benefits are strongest in the things that are really oily and fishy. So there are people who I think think fish is healthy, and then they go have fish and chips.

SARAH BALDWIN: Right.

ROSS CHEIT: Well, it's deep fried and the fish didn't even have very much omega-3 to start with.

SARAH BALDWIN: Or calamari.

ROSS CHEIT: Right. Calamari is another one where we're now eating a lot of deep fried calamari. It's delicious, but calamari is not charismatic. No one's going to care about the--

SARAH BALDWIN: No.

ROSS CHEIT: Yeah, but absolutely. Some fish are unattractive, and so some of these things are going to catch our attention much more than others.

SARAH BALDWIN: Has writing this book-- I know you're still in the process of researching and writing. Has it changed how you eat? Has it changed your relationship with fish?

ROSS CHEIT: I eat a lot of fish. I mean, we live in Rhode Island. We go to the farmers' market, and there's two fish possibilities there almost every week, I guess I probably ask more questions. And that's another thing about fishes and the complication. If you ask consumers about their fish eating and why they don't eat more, it's generally they're intimidated. They're not really sure the difference between species, they're not really sure how to prepare it. It's intimidating as opposed to a piece of chicken.

SARAH BALDWIN: Right, a chicken never arrives with its head on, whereas with a fish you might get sent home with a fish with its head on and people aren't used to that.

ROSS CHEIT: And so a place we've thought about that issue is the school lunch program, because also kids don't take to fish. So there's some really interesting examples where school nutritionists go to great lengths and come up with salmon cakes that the adults all think are great, but the kids still don't really like them because they're just-- kids like fish sticks.

SARAH BALDWIN: Well they're vehicles for ketchup

ROSS CHEIT: Well, yeah, and they're also crunchy and they have a kind of sensory feel that people like.

SARAH BALDWIN: Mhm. I wrote an article about something called GreenWave down in Connecticut, and it's seeding oysters and all sorts of shellfish, and it's cleaning the bay so hopefully Americans will make their peace with fish and discover the pleasures of fish and that policy will keep pace.

ROSS CHEIT: I think many people think farmed is the future, but it's interesting that farmed fish has barely gone up in this country in the last 20 years. It's gone up elsewhere. Why hasn't it gone up in this country? The same reason we only have six wind turbines. The farmed fish is going to occur in places where people have very expensive real estate, and even though I don't think farmed fish are some blight on the horizon there are plenty of people who object to having any kind of facility like that near them.

And so there's a real question in this country about how much more of this we'll ever even be able to do, even though physically we could, but it's not clear that it will happen in this country. People oppose it.

SARAH BALDWIN: Ross, this is so fascinating. I hope we can talk about this again some more. Thank you so

much for talking today.

ROSS CHEIT: Good! This was great.

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SARAH BALDWIN: This episode of Trending Globally was produced by Dan Richards, Jon [? Maza, ?] and Alex [? Lefiere. ?] Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm your host, Sarah Baldwin.

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